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An Act of Worship

1 Corinthians 15:50-16:1

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This is such a cool passage! Paul takes a concern within the life of one of the churches which he had established, and places that concern right in the heart of the Gospel message - which is right where it belongs! You see, Paul's statement about finances isn't an isolated text. In fact, this comment "Now concerning the collection for God's people," is sandwiched between two of the great themes of our faith.

The top layer of this sandwich reflects Paul's concern for giving as an act of devotion. In essence, he writes to the people at Corinth, "Whatever you give, let it be a response to the good news that God has shared with us in Christ." For Paul, the main thrust of that good news was very clear. He had found the matter of death to be the singularly offensive barrier to meaningful life. In his encounter with the living Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul recognized that God had somehow overcome death. Thus, the Gospel message was the message of a Risen Lord. Death is no longer an enemy.

So Paul writes in words that defy description, words which are unparalleled in their power and their poetry anywhere else in the New Testament:

> ***"Listen, I tell you a secret: We will not all die, but in an instant we shall all be changed, as quickly as the blinking of an eye, when the last trumpet sounds. For when it sounds, the dead will be raised immortal beings, and we shall all be changed … but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ … Now, the matter about the money to be raised."***

Do you think that arrangement is contrived? Not at all. Paul is very intentional here. And for good reason. The whole matter is a very deliberate part of Paul's central theme. When we open our hearts to the astounding message of what God has done, the miracle of sharing engulfs us! Paul moves between a very theological, God-talk discussion of how death has been overcome, directly into practical matters that concern the church. This seamless flow between what we believe and how we live our common life is both intentional on his part and the way we should live our lives here at CPC.

This is the reason why, in some churches, the regular offering on Sunday morning comes as the closing act of worship. It follows the sermon, the proclamation of the good news. The offering may actually belong at that point in our service because it is our liturgical and theological response to the good news of God in Jesus Christ!

During one period of preparation for a commitment to the ensuing year's budget in a church, the campaign steering committee said, "We want ensure that the people of this church have an opportunity to present their commitment cards as an

act of worship" - hopefully, not through the mail, and not by dropping cards off at the church, and not in a home visitation, but as an act of worship. So they designed a response that year to be given as a part of congregational worship.

Over and over, we hear the stories about the 'first fruits' in the scriptures. God called the people of the covenant community to give the first fruits. Somehow, to give 'off the top' of the pile was a more appropriate act of response to the goodness of God than to give from what was left over. Here was another symbolic reminder that giving is an act of devotion to God.

Several years ago, a friend told me a story from his own childhood. He was twelve or thirteen years of age. Across the street from his home lived a family with seven children. One day when he was playing with those children in the yard, the mother of the family invited him to stay for dinner. He knew the family to be of meager means. He also knew his presence would entail one more mouth to feed. But he decided to accept the invitation. He checked with his mother and was given permission to stay through the dinner hour.

As he sat down at the table with the family, he looked out of the corner of his eye at the window ledge just above the sink. There sat a beautiful, freshly made fruit pie. Immediately he became concerned, because he knew that his presence meant that the pie would have to be cut into even smaller pieces tonight in this large family.

The main part of the dinner was completed, and the table was cleared. The dessert plates were set out. The mother brought the pie to the table. She put the knife to it, cut a nice piece, lifted it out, put it on a plate, and set it in front of her young dinner guest. She began to mark the remainder with the knife, dividing it equally among the others. One of the boys sitting across the table spoke up plaintively, "Mom, please don't give me the last piece of pie."

Of course, we know what the boy was thinking. The last piece of pie was going to be the least desirable piece of all, and probably the smallest. My friend said that he never forgot that symbol. The message has stood with him during the entirety of his Christian life. He remembers this event as a sign of his own giving to God as an act of devotion with first fruits.

A clergy colleague of mine sometimes talks to his congregation about stewardship in terms of "dangerous giving." Such giving is not what comes out of the amount left over after expenses. Rather, it's giving that comes out of the same money with which we pay the utility bills, the mortgage, the car payments, and medical expenses. That kind of giving is an act of devotion.

Not long ago, I read a little book written by some denominational leaders projecting trends into the future. In a chapter on finances, they reflected on the trend of inflation and what it will mean to the church, the trend of energy consumption and attendant increasing costs, and the rapid rise in medical and hospitalization costs. I found that reading this chapter was helpful but *not central*. What we give for God's work through the church is *not* a matter of responding to trends. How we give in the context of the Christian faith is more than a matter of increasing our gift according to inflation figures or according to the increase in the budget for the coming year. Giving is *always* in the felt context of the power of the gospel.

We give in the Christian life because of our awareness of the power of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. We give because of what God has done for us. We give because of the experience of the life of faith within the community we call the church.

So the top layer of my sandwich is an act of devotion. The bottom layer is an act of discipline. For, really, with each passing year, we seem to be more lacking in the authentic discipline of life. Parents and families seem afraid to discipline their children

in love. They seem afraid their children won't love them, or they won't respect them, or they will run away from home. Many children actually seem to be crying out for a greater discipline of love. It's part of the God-given order of life.

We also fail to discipline ourselves in the use of our financial and other material resources. We spend ourselves to the limit and beyond. We indulge ourselves and our families in an annual Christmas buying binge, prodded by glossy pictures and enticing advertisements. We buy because our children or our grandchildren tell us that they really do 'want' some specific item. We buy because we are allowed to delay payments for ninety days.

Weeks after the spending binge, we sink into our chairs or sit before our checkbooks in growing depression and despair, wondering how we're going to pay for all of this undisciplined spending. So, you will see why the bottom layer of Paul's sandwich in an act of discipline. The matter of discipline is integral to the Christ-centered life. I remember an editorial about a new phenomenon in our nation known as "social depression." Most of us have at least a limited acquaintance with *personal* depression. We know how it can affect and limit our lives. A great deal is being done to try to combat such a condition in human beings. But *social* depression is different. It describes the apathy, the lethargy of a society that has lost its will and its drive for discipline.

Paul speaks directly to this matter when he says,

> ***"Now, about the matter of the money to be raised. You must do what I told the churches in Galatia to do. Every Sunday each of you must put aside some money in proportion to what he has earned so that there will be no need to take an offering when I come."***

The guidelines are clear. Every Sunday, each one is to set aside something as a proportional gift in relation to earnings or other income. Thus a call to discipline is the undergirding half of this sandwiched text. The response of faith is the response of the disciplined, well-ordered life. It's not casual. It's not occasional. It's not erratic. Faith calls us to planned, intentional, structured giving. This doesn't negate the joy of spontaneity or creativity, but discipline is at the heart of faithful discipleship. The Christ-centered, Christian life is a disciplined response to the good news of God.

Paul writes elsewhere of the disciplined prayer life: "Pray without ceasing." "Pray at all times." Paul would add, "Pray even when you don't feel like praying. Pray even when it seems like God could care less about that for which you are praying." Paul calls the early Christian community (and us) to the discipline of prayer and to the discipline of giving.

Disciplined giving has specific symbols. Offering envelopes provided and brought weekly to worship are one symbol. I really appreciated what Ernie said last week about how important it is to physically put their offering envelope into the plate. Envelopes remind all of us of the importance of orderly, disciplined giving.

Tithing is another symbol of discipline. Proportionate giving is a symbol of discipline. God doesn't call us to random offerings or whims of giving, but to regular, systematic, proportional first fruits. Each symbol is an instrument for growing in the Christian life.

In some churches, members and friends receive an annual letter that carefully explains the ministry and mission goals for the year ahead. We don't do that here because we don't want you to focus on what we want to do (though we do have vision for

what to do), but instead want you to focus on your spiritual growth. We remind you every year that your spiritual growth is very connected to where you place your treasure. We remind you that you have received much but there is much more for you to receive.

And we know something else. We know that a congregation *could* double or triple the annual church budget, and yet remain in considerable darkness as to the true meaning of discipleship. It's not now, nor ever, about money, per se. T. S. Eliot at one point says, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason." In giving money, it's entirely possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

What we believe God is saying is this: Engage in giving as an *act of devotion* to God and as an *act of discipline* in your own Christian life. If you grow your giving in this spirit, there will be blessings from God in your life journey, for giving is an act of worship.

[Sections of this sermon were drawn from the book *Right on the Money]*

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